

Word Association: Star Trek...Paramount; Star Traks...um...Alan Decker; BorgSpace...let's see...Maija Meneks

How Much Is That Doggy In The Window?

Luplup huddled under the bush, shivering and very much scared. The rain pouring out the sky didn't help matters any, soaking her feathers and causing sticky mud to cling to her tail. She wanted Owner, but Owner was gone.

Four days ago, not that the concept of time had much meaning for Luplup, the Bad-Mans-With-No-Scent had come. First Smelly-Woman from the house next door had disappeared, followed by Yellow-Clawed-Whiner and Noisy-Green-Tail. Finally the Bad-Mans had taken Owner, and Luplup managed to escape outside the open back door.

The nights were cold, the days wet, and there was no food. Luplup wanted her chew-chew toy, her blanket and basket, and especially Owner's nice voice. She wanted someone to wipe the mud off her tail and dry her feathers. To top off the misery, the pains she had been experiencing in her back and legs even before the Bad-Mans had come were getting worse.

Out of the gray day loomed a shadow. Luplup backed farther under the bush, but the foundation of the house behind her stopped her retreat. A voice with none of the musical tones of Owner rumbled something, then a pale hand reached under the cover. Luplup barked at it and clicked her beak in warning, but the hand did not falter. A bite tore skin and drew yellow-red blood which smelled metallic.

Luplup was firmly in the grasp of one of the Bad-Mans-With-No-Scent. It gave another rumbling noise, terrifying Luplup even more. The last thing the poor pet felt before she lost consciousness was a pair of sharp pricks against the base of her tail.

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Captain and Second, along with several other members of Cube #347, were in a large warehouse located at the extremity of a starport which had belonged to species #7190 until ten days prior. Four days ago the final members of the assimilated population had been loaded onto Assimilation-class ships for transport to planet #37, where processing would be completed and the new drones assigned duties for which each was deemed most fit. At that point, as most ships of the Collective moved on to other assignments, a handful of sub-collectives had been tasked to begin cataloguing the major cities for usable material and salvage. Cube #347 had been assigned a small number of cities on the smallest southern continent. It was a welcome break from their primary assignment of searching for signs of species #8511, of whom an intruder ship had been intercepted several months prior.

Captain absently ran his prosthetic hand over a stack of processed metal. The sensors registered a variation of duralloy, the density and tonnage of which Captain dutifully registered on the growing tally of salvageables. A similar notation was added on the net by Second, who was working on a stack of miscellaneous metals nearby.

"Transparent aluminum, grades of duralloy, ceramometallic superconducting wires, memory crystals...this is boring."

"It is a warehouse, Second."

"Join the Collective, they said...see the universe, they said. I'd rather be in stasis."

"For some reason I really doubt you had a choice in joining the Collective. And would

you really rather be a single and small being anymore?"

Silence from the stack of transparent aluminum.

"That's what I thought, so stop complaining." Captain dropped into the net of the cube orbiting high above the planet's surface. He took a moment to feel the relative emptiness of the corridors as most of the four thousand drones, regardless of specialty, were on the surface engaged in the inventory. He focused on the perpetually depressed Assimilation. {What are the current projections on this side-task?}

{Estimations are in the range of thirty-three to forty-two hours, then we'll be back cruising to look at yet another empty system in search of invisible species #8511.}

Second looked over at Captain. "Fun. I'm looking forward to it. Up to forty-two more hours of this."

"The more you complain, the longer it will be." Captain went to the next mound, which consisted of spools of multicolored wires, and extended his prosthetic limb again. He tried to think cheery thoughts to pass the time.

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Doctor transported into the maintenance bay nearest his alcove. The room was, at its most basic, the junction of multiple hallways, but much larger than the usual nodal intersection. A variety of tools and equipment was neatly stacked within it. A Federation engineer might feel at home in what appeared to be a fancy workshop, but the truth was that this was one of the main drone maintenance shops for Cube #347. Doctor dropped into the intranet board to check his docket, seeing that it was currently empty. Good.

With one arm cradling the limp form he had brought up from the surface, the other carefully pulled off a panel from a wall behind a particularly large piece of equipment. Captain, who had replaced a Borg viewscreen with a larger one salvaged from a captured ship, wasn't the only one to have made unauthorized changes to the cube's interior. Behind the panel was a crawlspace, closed off except for a small hole at the back. Looking at the wet thing in his arm, Doctor decided it would be suitably contained.

Doctor had been a veterinarian in his prior existence, and still held empathy for animals in his current imperfectly assimilated life. This tended to cause problems, the hamster incident amid the most serious, as Borg-modified instincts warred with his basic nurturing aptitude, driving him to attempt to assimilate non-sentients. There was never any danger of the animals infiltrating the sub-collective, but the nanite-enhanced creatures inevitably escaped and caused problems.

The most current pet Doctor had picked up was called a Yoole by its former species-owners. A healthy, fully-grown Yoole averaged a meter in length, half of which was a finely-scaled tail, and was about knee-high. It moved about on six legs, which were mostly obstructed from view by a dense layer of cream-colored hairlike feathers, with a fourth stunted pair located just below the stubby neck. This small pair of legs could crudely manipulate objects, mostly on the order of digging through leaf piles or rolling around rubber toys. The lizardlike head was blunt, sporting liquid brown or blue eyes. A warm-blooded creature, its ancestors were omnivores. The domesticated version ate the equivalent of Purina Pet Chow.

This particular Yoole was not healthy. It was wet, dirty, and very bedraggled. Doctor laid it in the alcove and closed the hatch. He would have to deal with the animal later, as a maintenance request was just flagged on his docket. To ignore his duty would call attention to

the inappropriate behavior, and it was difficult enough to hide his thoughts of the pet from the rest of the sub-collective.

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Luplup woke. She was still wet, but the cold had gone away. Now it was over warm and humid and dark, as if it was the hot season at night. It was not home though...the smells were all wrong, and the sounds were mysterious and scary. Luplup was also no longer hungry.

To be exact, Luplup didn't feel the normal kind of hunger that she associated with her belly. The sensation was more of an all-over body hunger. She ignored it for the moment. A particularly loud bang, followed by some whizzes and beeps caused Luplup to cower at the back of the dark box she was in. Her tail pushed against emptiness.

Feeling the nothingness behind her tail, Luplup turned in the cramped spot, putting her nose next to the hole. A little wiggle and her head fit through. This was enough for Luplup. A Yoole could voluntarily dislocate joints...anywhere the head could fit, the rest of the body could follow. Into the hole Luplup went, a bit of feather tearing on a jagged part of the opening.

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Doctor completed repairs to 5 of 31, sending her to her alcove for five hours of a regenerative cycle to complete the internal repairs remaining. With nothing else on the schedule, Doctor pulled back the piece of diagnostic equipment, followed with the false panel. Oh-oh...the Yoole was gone.

"Captain's gonna have my head when he finds out," said Doctor to himself while at the same time burying knowledge of the animal even deeper from the collective consciousness of the cube.

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Cube #347 finally completed the survey assigned, sending the data collected to the Greater Consciousness. Dismissed from the worries of the Greater Collective, Captain directed the cube back into transwarp to continue the exploratory survey of twenty-seven target systems, one or more of which may have some clue to species #8511's homeworld(s). The sub-collective was now enroute to the fifteenth system, ten days travel distant.

Deep within the bowels of the cube, Luplup changed. If Doctor had dug more fully into the newly-gained knowledge of species #7190, he might have realized the full common name of Luplup's species was Yoole-Vyst. The Yoole was the fifteen year long pre-mature stage...Vyst referred to the sexually mature adult. With the trauma of assimilation, Luplup, already on the verge of maturity, became Vyst.

Feathers fell out; and scales, which in a normal Vyst would have become brown or black, replaced the lost covering in a Borg-gray hue. Luplup achieved an increasingly upright stance, her back two pair of legs thickening into the limbs of a powerful sprinter. The forward pair remained fine for manipulating objects, but the second pair lengthened and became clawed...all the better to capture prey and defend the nest. The previously omnivorous dentition was replaced by the teeth of a carnivore; and most frightening of all, the small brain of the Yoole grew to accommodate the Vyst...a life stage the assimilated owner-species considered one of the most

intelligent on the planet after themselves.

At this point in the life of a female Vyst, there were two options. One, a male would be available, and mating would eventually produce eggs and Yoole young. Two, parthenogenic reproduction, a laying of eggs by the unmated female. The second option, because of variances in temperature the clutch would experience, would normally hatch female and male Vyst, from thus Yoole would eventually come. The constant temperature of the Borg ship, however, would make sure only more parthenogenic female Vyst would hatch.

All these aspects of biology were unknown to Luplup. Her instincts as metamorphosis completed were telling her that no males were present. Once again, trauma associated with assimilation by sentient-specific nanites wreaked havoc on the Vyst's hormones, which would normally allow a year before laying of eggs was initiated. No males to Luplup simply meant she needed to lay eggs, now.

Head blindly rotating in the dark, Luplup began her search for a nest.

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Captain blahed. System fifteen had been a bust. The sixteenth system had flushed a straggler ship of species #7910, the position and heading of which had been relayed to the Greater Consciousness. The current survey of system seventeen was thus far coming up another blank. To relieve the boredom, Captain had tied himself into the sensor grid, and was now amusing himself trying to follow the mind patterns of Sensors as she analyzed a pair of terrestrial planets and their associated moons.

In the central engineering core, Delta was not so bored. The latest cube diagnostic had brought up several curious anomalies, none of which were immediately threatening. Subsection 10, submatrix 2 was the only potential problem, as it dealt with the regeneration system for that part of the ship.

Assimilation had several biologically dangerous side effects, the most serious of which was the complete shutdown of the digestive system. The regeneration cycle was necessary in part to replace proteins, carbohydrates, sugars, amino acids, vitamins, minerals, and so on the various drones needed to keep in good health. Problems which affected the regeneration system could impact the efficiency of the cube.

Delta dispatched 18 of 42 to the anomalous area to assess and make repairs.

18 of 42 removed the panel and peered in at the interstitial corridor. He quickly modified his optical implants until a clear view of the small area was achieved. That accomplished, the drone threaded his way into the maze of pipes and wires.

The problem was quickly found. A hollow ceramometallic pipe had been spliced into one of the major arteries of the local regeneration system. Fluid dripped around the inexpert welds, forming a fairly large puddle. Frowning at the mess, he sent a query to the net, asking who had done the sloppy work, and why. Return sentiment was on the order of "Not me" and "I don't know."

Looking around, 18 of 42 decided to remove the hose, patch the artery, then try to see where the nutrients had been siphoned off to. He was immensely surprised as an unseen creature rose from where it had been hiding, hissing and clacking its teeth in dangerous warning.

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Luplup was in many places at once. Her, the original her, the brooding her, was at the center of a nest of wires and soft fibers, the compartment just large enough to hold herself and the eight eggs. A hose came in the single opening. When the body-hunger came, she would attach the hose with the food-fluid to a place on her torso. It seemed odd not eating with her mouth, but at the same time it was pleasingly correct.

Other parts of her roamed about the hidden corridors, looking for things to add to the nest. She was bringing back wires, carrying a snippet of hose, and nosing a shiny object all at the same time. Another part of her had found a new food-fluid artery, and was beginning to prepare it to tap for the colony.

Suddenly she was a soldier, guarding the food supply. One of the Bad-Mans-With-No-Scent was trying to cut off the liquid. She lunged at the Bad-Mans, sending him backing down the corridor. More of her came running down the hall to help herself, all of her hissing and barking, making the Bad-Mans retreat. Finally the Bad-Mans went away, and the nest was safe once more. Luplup curled around her eggs. All of her purred contentedly.

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Captain awoke from his regeneration cycle, vaguely unsettled. As clamps and umbilicals disengaged, he automatically stepped from his alcove to the catwalk. Captain often allowed his mind to passively ride the thoughts of the currently active drones, floating on the local net which comprised the sub-collective. The feeling was like a lucid dream in which one knows one can alter the outcome simply by taking control...although Captain rarely exercised such a prerogative. This time had been different.

The familiar corridors had been darker and narrower than normal, the viewpoint much closer to the ground. There was the hum and click of machinery, but also soft grunts and hisses. A tactile impression at one point had brought sensations of smoothly scaled skin rubbing against more of the like; and the faintly warm coolness of metal brushed against an arm. As far as Captain could determine, he must have been experiencing the conscious dataflow of one of the few nonhumanoids aboard the cube...that was the only explanation.

Captain's personal analysis of the "dream" fell apart as 18 of 42's shock at being attacked surged within the net. As the maintenance drone retreated to the catwalk, Delta was already searching for a particular member of the cube - Doctor.

{Doctor! There are animals on board!}

Doctor winced, his time was up. {Yes, maybe a Yoole or two. Harmless.}

{Harmless? I don't think so.}

{Yooles are a simple pet, so domesticated they can only chew processed food.} Doctor let down his partitions enough to allow the sub-collective a glimpse of his image of a Yoole. {I'm surprised it even survived, considering the condition I last saw it in.} A small lie...he knew on a faint level due to his empathy that it had survived, even given birth; it must have been pregnant when he had brought it aboard.

Delta mulled over the words and the image, {That is not the animal we saw, Doctor. Not the animal at all.} A second picture was returned, this one resembling the first in a faint way, excepting for the fact it stood over waist high on four legs with incredibly nasty teeth and claws.

Doctor blinked. {I don't recognize that animal. I admit I did bring a Yoole on board, but I did not bring that thing.}

Following the exchange with increasing confusion, Captain uploaded the recent files from the Engineering docket, succeeded by 18 of 42's experiences. Finally he broke in. {Stop. There is a connection here among this data we need to work out. We will process it, then figure out where to place blame...after we figure out what to do.} Acknowledgment was sent by the parties involved, neatly postponing the budding argument.

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Luplup dreamed. She was at the center of a vast colony, all her even as they did not all look like her. She was a giant Luplup, reaching out to grasp nesting territory in distance units she did not know how to express...did not even know before now there was even a distance that large that needed to be expressed.

Machine-things helped Luplup, much in the same way they had once helped Owner. Once Owner had done mysterious things with his machines. There had been the Wheeled-Thing, the Always-Cold-Place, the Humming-Box in which Owner had placed many of the foods before he ate them, and the Noisy-Box-With-Moving-Sights. Machines now whirled and beeped as Luplup told them to, and Luplup was as powerful as Owner.

In her dream, Luplup began to understand. There were such things as words, as language, as technology. As Yoole, Luplup would not have even had a chance to learn the Owner-mysteries, but as Vyst, her brain structure was complex enough to grasp the knowledge, to see how it could help her expand to become that giant Luplup.

Luplup continued to dream.

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The consensus was in...Cube #347 had a problem. Doctor had assimilated and brought aboard a relatively harmless Yoole, which had metamorphosed to maturity as a Vyst. Vysts were potentially parthenogenic females, which this one appeared to be; and Vysts were also much more intelligent than Yooles, and much more nasty. In fact, Vysts appeared to be on the cusp of true sentience, and the effect of nanites on such an animal was an unknown.

Captain expressed reality for the cube, {Whatever may happen, this menace must be killed. Besides affecting the efficiency of this cube by tapping crucial systems, there is the slim possibility the animals may access the nets. This must not happen. The quest toward perfection and Oneness is strained as is by our imperfect assimilation. If pre-sentients managed to influence the workings of the Greater Consciousness, all might be lost.}

{Not to mention the fact the Greater Consciousness would be extremely pissed,} a voice said, only to lose itself in the general agreement which followed.

Captain ignored the bantering, {All six hundred of Weapon's hierarchy will begin a search-and-destroy program. An additional one hundred from engineering hierarchy will assist, including use of hand-held weaponry, as will myself and Second.}

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Part of Luplup had been exploring far from the main nesting area. She had lately dreamed of the idea of "noncentral distribution", which translated, among other concepts, to having more than one brooding nest. There were several other of herself which could lay eggs, and it was time

additional colonies were established.

Luplup had learned early that the Bad-Mans generally did not acknowledge her existence. As long as she did not get in the way of their movements, they did not bother her scouting. Still, she did keep to the places the Bad-Mans did not go, just in case. Luplup had just found a place called "Auxiliary Core #4", an area with lots of something called "power." If she wanted to grow into a giant Luplup, she would need power; and there appeared to be adequate hidden corridors and food-liquid arteries for a second brooding nest near the core as well.

A Bad-Mans stepped around the corner, approximately ten meters from the scout. Luplup rose up for a better look, then backed up to allow the Bad-Mans room to pass. The Bad-Mans did not continue as it had in the past, instead stopping and raising one of its arms. Scout Luplup was still watching the Bad-Mans in curiosity when she felt a burning sensation along her neck and torso, then fell into darkness

Brooding Luplup screamed. She had been hurt! A part of her no longer responded, and she felt herself become smaller. Five minutes later, a pair of Luplup that had been bringing hose and wires back to the main nest was also lost; and another scout Luplup just escaped into the hidden corridors, although her tail was blackened and smelled of burnt meat.

Luplup huddled about her eggs, then growled. The Bad-Mans were a danger to her and the nest.

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The eradication effort was going well. Thus far, seven of the Vysts had been killed, and two wounded before escaping. Unfortunately, the animals had also proved their intelligence. The main nesting area was known, but the creatures had procured both welding tools and large sheets of metal, effectively sealing Borg-sized holes, but leaving smaller routes they could travel through. An effort was now underway to remove the barriers and strike into the nest itself.

The survey of the system was also proceeding. The second terrestrial planet from the primary had shown life signs, and the cube had been brought closer for a more thorough analysis.

{Report, Sensors,} called Captain through the net.

{Sensors finds that this planet suffered a major [boom] event approximately one hundred thirty Cycles ago. There are [footprints] of extensive use of aerial nuclear bombardment, and the current frigid climate conditions also support the evidence of a [tussle]. No technological signs that the previously [doormat] species still survives, although it might have regressed to stone-age science.

{Sensors believes the species was in a pre-warp [wagon]. The only other evidence of habitation found in the system is deep under the crust of the planet's moon. The use of [dirty] soils to shield sensitive organics from radiation is consistent with primitive space-faring civilizations.

{The [song] of Sensors' hierarchy is this is not the home system of species #8511 nor a colony.}

Captain agreed with the consensus, then placed the cube in a high orbit about the planet. They would finish the extermination of the vermin Vysts before heading to the next target system.

Assimilation and two of his hierarchy were performing a necropsy on one of the dead animals to determine the extent of their alterations by the nanites. The discoveries he was finding

was creating disturbing conclusions among the sub-collective.

The complexity of the brain was astounding for a pre-sentient, and it was theorized that given the proper evolutionary push, the Vyst component of the Yoole-Vyst life cycle could ascend to full sentience within a few hundred thousand years. The nanites had, in a way, accelerated that evolution in their attempt to follow their programming. Neural connections had been made and memory pathways strengthened which was slowly elevating the resident Vysts to something beyond animal, but not quite Borg. The outcome was a creature which could adapt and learn to use some of the technology found on the cube, as employment of arc welders had thus far succinctly demonstrated.

And that is not the worst of our problems. {I would say based on this autopsy, certain physical adaptations are possible - vacuum and radiation resistance, perhaps energy shielding.}

Captain mused, {So the current armaments may become useless.}

{Yes, but the horror does not stop there. There is an organically-derived transceiver located in the brain. It is similar to that built by the nanites during a sentient assimilation, but before the more powerful hardware analogue is implanted.}

Realization swiftly sunk in at the words, {These animals are operating with Borg Oneness?}

Assimilation sighed, {Yes. Fortunately, because the transceiver is organic-derived in nature, its range is limited to five kilometers. Unfortunately, there is very real evidence the Vysts, or Vyst as would be more appropriate, may have access to our net. If so, it will have access to our databases.}

{Can we neutralize the threat through incorporation?}

{No. It is still an animal with animal thought patterns. The question is academic anyway, as the Vyst has been developing its own model of Oneness, probably since it was first brought on board by Doctor, and would be incompatible with Borg.}

One word echoed throughout the cube, {Sh**.}

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Luplup no longer had to sleep to dream. In the comfortable darkness of her nest, she could send herself running through odd corridors, not with her body, but with her mind. It was hard to avoid the Bad-Mans in this place, and more than once she stumbled into them, but she was able to swiftly duck and hide. Thus far she was confined to the thing called "Cube #347 sub-collective". A thread stretched temptingly away towards a brighter and bigger place, but it was heavily guarded by the minds of those associated with the name Weapons.

The barriers to the nest were holding for the moment, however the Bad-Mans were burning through the metal. More sheets had been welded into place, but in the end, the nest would be compromised. She had to...to...to plan for the future. She had to make herself look beyond the present, far beyond the present, or else Luplup would grow very small and eventually be no more. There was knowledge to be found in the mental corridors; and knowledge was just another type of power, like the reactor core, which Luplup craved. The answers to her dilemma must be found!

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The members of Cube #347 reacted in shock when 93 of 300, one of the hierarchy of

Weapons, failed to kill a Vyst which had ventured from its fortified nest. Aim had been perfect, and the shot should have burned through the beast's torso...except for the fact that the Vysts appeared to have developed energy shielding, similar, if not the same, to that employed by the Borg itself against species with personal weaponry such as phasers.

A cruder method of eradication had to be prepared. Transporting the Vysts from the ship and dumping them in space would have been ideal, except for the fact a lock could not be achieved. Between an extremely DNA-diverse crew and Borg implants, sensors could not distinguish the intruders at a fine enough resolution for transporter lock. And as there had never been any need for such fancy transporter skills, the Collective had never developed them. However, physically tagging the Vysts with transponders was a viable alternative; the signals emitted by the tags would allow for a lock.

Therefore, armaments of the hunter-killer groups were altered to shoot tags. The shielding of the targets could not adapt to nonenergy weapons. Success was proven a short time later as the first of three Vysts found behind a barrier were transported into their own personal orbit.

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She was safe! No longer could the "energy weapons" used by the Bad-Mans hurt her! Luplup purred, listening to the sounds of the little hers in the egg struggle to be born. Another day, perhaps two, and she would grow larger again. The newest parts of her would take several weeks to attain a useful size, but the Bad-Mans could no longer destroy her.

Days, weeks, months...these concepts were among the newest she had gathered from the data files. In order to plan for a larger her, "time" and "future" became increasingly relevant. The Bad-Mans were becoming aware of her forays into their mental spaces, so she had begun to grab at whatever information she could acquire, loading it into the spaces of her brain which could accommodate it. She would rearrange it later when the nest was secure.

As she dodged the mental signature called "Captain" ("4 of 8" was another designation) and turned onto an interesting side path, she felt a part of her bark warning as a peripheral barrier was breached. Her three soldier parts stationed at the entrance leapt to attack, attempting to gain the time necessary for the welding of the next metal plate to be completed. The Bad-Mans held out their arms again, but instead of the energy beam, small staples of metal emerged. Each of the three her felt the metal bite into torso or neck.

Luplup was suddenly surrounded by green sparkles! When the sparkles disappeared, she was floating. Three points of view spun in nauseating circles as tails lashed and limbs stretched for nonexistent support. Blackness studded with points of light dominated the scene, although one of her caught sight of a two balls much like she distantly remembered playing with as a Yoole - one multicolored with swirls of white and the other a dusty gray.

The contact with her three parts slowly dissipated. Like a thread stretched too tight, Luplup felt her perception snap. It was not death, not like the burning of the Bad-Mans, but she had grown smaller none-the-less. A part of her still crawling the net whispered that her subspace link had broken, and that those parts of her would have died and been lost anyway.

Luplup was now scared. This place called Cube #347 was not a safe nesting ground. The Bad-Mans were smarter than her, and would eventually find all of her. Already she was only two-thirds as large as she had been a week earlier. She needed a safe place to live and grow. Luplup had thought she felt an interesting datastream near the "Captain" presence, and so

carefully returned. Yes, the information was clear, the "command codes" obvious.

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Captain felt the odd presence again. Curious, he sent a request for identification, but no return was forthcoming. The mental signature was unique although there was no attendant designation to pair it with. Exasperated, Captain queried a second time, this time surging the net to force a reply.

{Luplup,} said the unknown before it sidled away again, erecting a crude, but effective, firewall behind it.

Luplup? There was no Luplup on board; all had proper Borg designations except for those in temporary positions of hierarchy head. Captain tore down the firewall, flinging the data blockage away. The Luplup had laid down several trails, its massive searches through command structure files masking the true direction of travel. Had the cube picked up a virus? Captain immediately initiated a narrowing of the subspace link with the Greater Consciousness, lessening the already tenacious connection with the Collective without actually severing it.

The Luplup brushed Captain's thoughts again, this time digging through sensor logs of the current system before grabbing a file and jumping away. Captain attempted to lay a series of pitfalls and code traps, but the entity proved too cunning.

In the material world of the cube, another series of barriers had been breached, along with an adjacent bulkhead, resulting with the tag and transport of six more Vysts into vacuum. In addition, Delta had finally completed the massive task of rerouting regeneration arteries to avoid the indicted area without depriving too many alcoves of nutrient supplements. Captain's resources were stretched with supervision of the multiple ongoing tasks crossed with the net search for the Luplup, thus the sudden alteration of the cube's orbit to send it slowly dropping towards the planet caught him completely by surprise.

{What the hell? Who is messing with the command codes?} called an exasperated Captain over the net as he attempted to correct the situation. He gained control momentarily, only to lose it again. {Weapons, Second, Sensors?} he queried, seeking out the most obvious drones who might have a legitimate reason to move the ship. Negatives were returned. Next Captain ran down the list of crewmembers who in the past had managed to take control to follow personal whims. Again, no dice.

{I/We don't like this place. I/We would rather grow large on the planet,} rasped an unknown voice which wavered between use of singular and plural. {No, this place is not safe at all. For Luplup to become giant, I/we must be where the Bad-Mans are not.}

Luplup? What is Luplup? Who is Luplup? Thoughts raced through the net as Captain drew increasingly on the resources of his hierarchy to force his command codes into Borg machinery while at the same time closing avenues of access to the Luplup's own efforts. The cube wobbled as it alternated between orbits. Luplup? Is it the Vyst? Luplup is the Vyst? There is an animal in the net? The last consensus-drawn conclusion rocked the sub-collective; the ramifications were astoundingly awful.

Captain looked around the nodal intersection, deciding he had to personally observe the removal of the Vysts, especially the main one, the queen. It rankled, using that word, but queen was the only designation which fit. The Luplup was the central focus of the group, and for all practical purpose she appeared to /be/ the group. In many ways, those animals were more Borg than the Borg themselves, more One. As far as Captain could feel, there was only one personality

spread in an unknown number of bodies...even the average drone of the Collective retained a unique mental signature to tell it apart from the Whole. Captain felt vaguely sick, it was not right to have perfection potentially achieved by pre-sentients! The directed musings were echoed by the general sub-collective.

A transporter beam was activated, taking Captain to subsection 10, submatrix 2. As the green shimmering dissipated, he observed first-hand the activities he had previously experienced vicariously. This section of ship was being taken apart piece by piece. The interstitial corridors were too narrow for most drones to move freely, therefore they were being widened via application of high energy cutting torches. The resulting gaps in the bulkheads were too large for the defending Vysts to block, and so the animals were retreating. At the far end of the subsection another Vyst was tagged, this one half the size of the prior beasts, and sent to the oblivion of vacuum.

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Luplup was fighting a losing battle on both the plains she could sense. In the nets, the control of Cube #347's propulsion system continued to waver; currently she was heading away from the planet and towards the moon. Slashing at a blockage of code, she managed to activate the maneuvering thrusters along one face edge, sending the ship into an ineffective spin. Within the nest, her self had been much reduced. Her remaining half-grown selves from the prior hatching were now forced to perform duties they were not ready to do, and her two other adult bodies could not efficiently continue to place the blockages.

Retreat was the answer. Retreat. Or perhaps there was another plan. Letting up slightly on the commands Luplup had been attempting to force, she made an attack from a different vector. If she was not to be allowed to grow big, she would take the Bad-Mans with her.

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Captain blazed as he felt thruster control slip along a full face, but the resulting spin was unimportant. The mind which was Luplup was powerful in an animalistic way of quick strikes in many places, but the Borg minds wielded by Captain were, in the end, too large and overwhelmingly strong to lose. A rout appeared to be in effect. Barriers no longer had defenders behind them, with hastily abandoned welding torches evidence of a quick retreat.

Suddenly Captain regained complete impulse and thruster control. The disengagement of Luplup shocked Captain, but he swiftly recovered and began the process to take the cube away from the uncomfortably close moon. Then transwarp engines began to come on-line just as whispers of mutual death began to float into the sub-collective consciousness.

With its own existence suddenly in peril, the members of Cube #347 reacted in concerted fear. Delta authorized the emergency shut-down of all cores but one, depriving the power-demanding drives of energy. All over the ship systems dimmed and nonessentials shut down in order to conserve that energy which could be gleaned from the remaining core. Drones invading the nest finally found the central brooding area, the remaining Vysts crouching and hissing in agitation, bunched around a dark opening. The seven animals were tagged and summarily beamed away.

A narrow head peered out of the opening, barked once, then withdrew. Growling echoed inside the cubicle.

Captain locked off the last of the significant command codes from Luplup. There were still things she could do, but actions such as dumping the contents of the cargo holds would be a simple annoyance. The cube was still heading on a vector which would intersect the moon, but it would be well over two hours before the situation became critical; and by then this problem would be finished.

{Luplup, can you understand me?} Captain was pushing his way through the drones of Weapons' hierarchy, making his way to the pair of engineering units at head of the line who were cutting into the bulkhead to enlarge the opening. He prodded the presence which was still on the net, {Luplup, answer me.}

A sullen yet defiant reply, {I/We are small now, but I/we are still Luplup.}

21 of 310 and 173 of 310 finished the cutting. 173 of 310 peered into the hole, then swept the cutter in a sharp arc. The smell of rapidly cooked eggs and roasted meat drifted out, combined with minute crackling sounds. A squeal of rage and pain followed.

{You have slaughtered myself! This brooding I is angry, is mad!} The reptilian head lunged out again, swifter than the reflexes of 173 of 310 could swing the cutter. Unerringly aimed for the head of the sub-collective, Luplup could only bite the bodysuit encasing Captain's lower leg. A curse echoed in the nets, accompanied by another shriek from the cubicle as Luplup drew back, broken tooth clattering to the metal floor. Captain pushed past the two drones into the cramped space.

Captain looked at Luplup in a combination of sympathy, pity, and diminishing anger. The latter was backed as far as she could go into the accessway, but the bulkhead prevented farther retreat. Uncomfortable memories swirled around in the thoughts of Cube #347 and Vyst alike of a similar scenario involving a frightened Yoole huddling under bushes on a distant world.

{I'm sorry, my queen, but you are not of Borg, nor could you be of Borg. You have the potential of detracting from our quest of perfection, even though in many ways you have achieved that perfection yourself; but it is an animalistic Oneness that you offer, and the Borg strive to achieve something above that baseness.

{We can only have one queen, and you cannot be it.}

Captain raised his prosthetic and fired; the tag buried itself in Luplup's side. A transporter beam was activated, removing the Vyst from the ship. Offending influence on the net now safely beyond the range of nanite-built organic transceiver, Captain took full control of Cube #347, moving it away from the moon's surface.

{There is no chance the Vyst will survive? We know the transporter dumped her on the moon's surface, but with the alterations by the nanites, she will not die right away.} Captain was talking to Second, who compiling the data supplied by Assimilation, Doctor, and Sensors, was playing the role of reality to Captain's position of devil's advocate. It was always good to review all the options in forming a strong consensus.

Second was adamant, {The odds of the Vyst surviving long enough to find an airlock which is still accessible are astronomical. Add in the factors of knowledge to work the airlock and finding usable resources within installations abandoned for over a century, and the possibility of success is an infinitesimal percent above zero.} The calculations made to get to the answer were quickly reviewed, although the fact that many drones in the cube had assisted in the computation made the action unnecessary.

{Consensus accepted,} declared Captain for the sub-collective. The last of the off-lined cores had been revived. Cube #347 leaped into transwarp, enroute to target system eighteen.

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Dim lights awoke Luplup, and she knew she was safe for the moment. When she had been beamed to the dusty place where it was hard to move, she had instinctively held her breath although it had been unnecessary. Even now it was becoming easier to express the concept of "low gravity moon" and "airless environment", and know that she could survive for at least some time without shelter due to the technologies in her body.

Still, the door she had found after falling in a deep crevice had been a welcome sight. Luplup had known that she had to push the buttons just so, and turn the handle in just such a way to release the grips. Inside a second door awaited, and the whispers in her mind had told her how to complete the airlock cycle. Beyond the second door had been atmosphere she could breath, the shock of which sent her into unconsciousness.

Luplup blinked her eyes wearily as she looked at her surroundings. The machines were odd, but similar enough to the pictures of technology in her head that she knew she could survive. There were materials which could be altered to provide the food-liquid she needed; and the lights proclaimed a useful power source. Many viable eggs were still in her body...Luplup would grow large again.

The Bad-Mans would pay. "Revenge" was another concept understood now. ::It will take a long time,:: thought Luplup to herself, ::but I will make my way back to space. Then I will hurt the Bad-Mans as they hurt me.::

She was Luplup. Resistance was futile. All would be annihilated.